

State Representative *Helen Sommers*



1997 SESSION REPORT

36th
District

Dear 36th District Resident,

This year Republicans took control of both the State House and State Senate for the first time since 1981-- along with the new Democratic Governor Gary Locke at the head of state government.

The session was dominated by differences on welfare, health care, transportation, the football stadium, and controversy over abortion and gay issues, as well as philosophical differences on tax cuts and a spending level. The governor used his veto power extensively to moderate actions by the Legislature.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Helen Sommers".

Helen Sommers
State Representative, 36th District

WELFARE AS WE HAVE KNOWN IT

Congress passed welfare reform last year and all states must comply. Congress repealed the 60-year entitlement and renamed welfare "Temporary Aid to Needy Families," or TANF. This action drove all sides closer together. The Legislature passed and the governor signed a new welfare program known as "WorkFirst."

Gov. Locke vetoed the first bill and rewrote the second through section vetoes. Benefits will be limited to a total of five years, with few exceptions. Newly arriving immigrants will be eligible after 12 months in the state — but their sponsors' income will be counted in determining eligibility — therefore, few are expected to qualify. Work will be the goal. All able recipients must seek employment. Young teen mothers will be required to live with parents or relatives in almost all cases.

Parents who fail to pay child support could find, after due process, that their driver's or professional license will be suspended. This practice has been initiated in

other states. Very few licenses were actually suspended; most parents caught up on child support payments.

FAMILY PLANNING IS REAL WELFARE REFORM

I feel like a lone voice but I am convinced that the only way to reduce welfare is to greatly reduce unintended pregnancy.

State and federal funds pay for 40 percent of total births in our state. Surveys of women on Medicaid show 60 percent report their pregnancy as "unintended" — meaning they didn't want to get pregnant, or not at that time.

I added a section to the welfare bill to create a "task force on unintended pregnancy," directed to research costs, analyze the impact on welfare, and develop and implement a strategy to reduce unintended pregnancy.

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Committees: Appropriations (Ranking Democratic Member) • Capital Budget • Joint Committee on Pension Policy • Joint Legislative Audit & Review Committee • Telecommunications Oversight & Policy Committee

STADIUM PROPOSAL ON JUNE BALLOT

The proposal to tear down the Kingdome and build a new stadium for football has been one of the most controversial issues of the legislative session. The total cost is \$400 million; \$300 million will be paid by the taxpayers and the prospective Seahawks owner will contribute \$100 million.

Some legislators voted simply to place the issue on the ballot on June 17 for a "yes" or "no" from the voters. I believe I have the responsibility as your legislator to analyze the proposal and vote my best judgment.

I voted against the proposal for the following reasons:

- The proposal requires tearing down the Kingdome, which is only 21 years old. Even though it would be gone, taxpayers will be paying off the debt for fixing the roof through the year 2015.
- The financing package was changed to shift the major cost from sports fans to the general public. The sports logo tax was dropped. The requirement that new lottery games use sports themes was dropped. Lottery revenues have been falling, partly due to gambling alternatives such as casinos. Any lottery revenue shortfall will be paid from the state general fund.
- The state will issue bonds and bear the risk of repayment over 20 years. If the interest on the bonds is six percent or more, repayment could require a loan against the general fund.
- The team is committed to play only ten games per year in this \$400 million project.
- The team owner will receive all revenues from selling licenses for preferred seating. He could recoup much of the \$100 million contribution as these rights have proved to be lucrative in other states.



The Kingdome, with pilings for the new retractable-roof Mariners stadium in foreground. The ballot proposal would demolish the Kingdome and replace it with a second, open-air stadium.

- The recently identified Seattle fault runs right under the Kingdome. It will slip again some day. Why put \$400 million right over a seismic fault?
- K-12 and higher education are higher priorities for me.

Proponents of the plan listed the following reasons:

- The voters should be given a choice.
- The Seahawks will leave without a better facility and the area will lose pro football.
- The prospective owner is contributing \$100 million and will assume the risk of construction cost overruns.
- Revenue estimates are conservative; revenues will grow faster and should not require money from the general fund.
- Ten percent of the seats are to be at affordable prices.
- Sports benefit business and the economy.

PAY FOR TEACHERS AND STATE EMPLOYEES

Only very small cost-of-living increases have been approved for teachers and state employees in recent budgets. The total across-the-board increase in the six years from July 1993 to July 1999 will be seven percent, or just over one percent per year. These working families are falling behind as inflation is rising faster than pay increases.

The state funds a beginning teacher at \$22,950 per year. This is woefully inadequate to attract talented people. State government needs qualified competent employees. It will be difficult to recruit and retain the people we need.

A TRANSPORTATION/EDUCATION COALITION?

The state gas tax, at 23 cents per gallon, has not been raised since a one-cent increase in 1991 and has lost buying power to inflation. The majority party in this Legislature is dominated by members who oppose any new tax.

Business leaders have been voicing increasing concerns about our transportation gridlock, about “freight mobility,” and the future impact on our economy.

Washington is the most trade-dependent state in the country, but growing gridlock threatens our future. California is making a huge investment in a right-of-way exclusively for trains and trucks — they will be attracting our trade. A Freight Mobility Advisory Committee recommended 28 top priority projects — aimed especially at relieving the intense congestion around the ports of Seattle and Tacoma.

Conservative business voices urged a seven-cent gas tax increase — after pushing for many tax reductions. This critical transportation investment got caught in the crossfire. We need to increase the gas tax and fund the mobility projects. We also need to lift the tight expenditure lid imposed by Initiative 601 and assure revenues to adequately fund K-12 and higher education.



A familiar headache: Congestion on I-5

This package would be a worthy project for cooperation — including state and local officials, the ports, the many business interests involved, and advocates for education. Do we have the vision, and the will, to form such a coalition?



Aerial view of Capitol Campus and lakefront

THE BUILDING BUDGET

I'm pleased to return to a spot on the Capital Budget Committee. The capital budget builds our schools, universities, parks, museums and lots more.

WEATHER AND THE CAPITOL DOME —

Preserving our dramatic Capitol building and dome is a major challenge. The lichen and mosses promoted by our damp climate are digging in and flaking away the native sandstone. That great dome must be cleaned — carefully. And, since sandstone needs to breathe, any sealant must protect but not smother.

OLYMPIA'S HERITAGE PARK —

If you visit our beautiful Capitol Campus, take time to walk (or wheelchair) the switchbacks down the bluff to Capitol Lake. At the lake's north end, toward the Sound, enjoy the dancing sprites of the new fountain, leaping and falling in whimsical patterns from their watery stage.

Funding in this year's capital budget will continue a beautification project along the lakefront. Known as Heritage Park, it is based on a 1911 master plan. The park will contain symbols of both eastern and western Washington and our natural resources.

NO FINGERPRINTS ON DRIVER'S LICENSE

Increasing cases of "stolen identity" allow criminals to obtain a "replacement" driver's license and then open checking accounts and credit cards in the name of the unsuspecting victim. A ruined credit record can have enormous negative effects and take years to correct.

Police, sheriffs, state patrol and others supported adding a fingerprint to a driver's license, effectively blocking a would-be thief from obtaining your identity and stopping this growing fraud. The proposal was controversial; opponents called it highly intrusive. The fingerprint requirement was changed to voluntary; each driver would decide. This version passed the House but died in the Senate because of the opposition.

TERM LIMITS

By a 52-percent "yes" vote on a 1992 ballot initiative, state voters passed term limits on Congress and the Legislature. (In contrast, 36th District voters said "no" by a 59-41 margin.)

Federal courts overturned limits placed on Congress; however, term limits on the Legislature remain in effect. House members are restricted to three two-year terms, effective after 1992. A suit has recently been filed to overturn the legislative term limits and a decision is expected early in 1998. The 1997 and 1998 sessions will be my last if the initiative is upheld in court.

DRAGONFLY — OFFICIAL STATE BUG

Yep, the kids won this one. A Kent grade school sent ballots to schools statewide asking for a vote on a state insect. The green darner dragonfly won out. The reasons? It predates dinosaurs, it zaps bad bugs, it is not harmful to humans. Just as a reminder, the state gem is petrified wood, the dance is the square dance, and the fish is the steelhead trout.



Green darner dragonfly